

Myth #115: Plausible De-Nye-Ability: Just How Large is Nye County? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Nye County in central Nevada is commonly referred to as the second largest county in size in the continental United States after San Bernardino County, California. It's not. That would be Coconino County in northern Arizona. Nye County ranks third.

The land area of Nye County today is 18,159 square miles. Coconino County, with Flagstaff as its county seat, is 18,661 square miles. San Bernardino County is 20,105 square miles.

When the territorial legislature created Nye County on February 16, 1864 and named it after Governor James W. Nye, it was about the same size, but looked very different. Carved out of one of Nevada's first counties, Esmeralda County, Nye County was in the shape of a square. The Legislature in its infinite wisdom named lone the county seat, although it was just outside the Nye County line in Esmeralda County. Nye County's boundaries needed a survey.

In 1865, the state legislature slightly redefined the boundary at the expense of Churchill County. After Lincoln County was created in 1866, Nye County shrunk in size.

In 1866 and 1867, Congress authorized the extension of Nevada's boundaries to the east and south respectively. As a result, Nye County grew to the largest size in its history.

The State Legislature moved the county seat from lone south to the mining boomtown of Belmont in 1867. During lone's three-year tenure as the Nye County seat of government, it remained in Esmeralda County. Finally, two years later, the legislature adjusted Nye County's northwest boundary to include lone.

The year 1869 also saw Lander County reduced in size with the creation of Elko and White Pine Counties. Nye County has been Nevada's largest county ever since.

Nye County's boundaries have essentially been the same since 1877. The legislature in that year carved out portions of eastern Nye County and added them to Lincoln and White Pine counties. A boundary adjustment with Esmeralda County cost Nye County a long sliver of land on the west.

The Legislature designated Tonopah as the Nye County seat in 1905. Less than five years old, the silver boomtown had resurrected the sparsely populated state mired in a mining depression since the 1880s. Nevada's second great mining boom created many new communities including the Nye County towns of Manhattan, Round Mountain, Pioneer and Rhyolite.

Rhyolite and southern Nye County grew so large in a few short years that a legislative bill was introduced to create a new county, Bullfrog County, in February 1909. The act failed to pass. Beginning in October 1907, a catastrophic national banking panic dried up investment capital. Rhyolite was already showing signs of decline in the midst of the banking panic and the 1910 census confirmed it. The town rapidly declined from an estimated peak population of 8,000 in 1907 to a meager 675 hangers-on in 1910. By 1920, Rhyolite was a virtual ghost town.

The state legislature created a Bullfrog County inside Nye County in 1987, but for much different reasons. The federal government had begun planning a high level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain. The Legislature's purpose in creating Bullfrog County was to punish Nye County for encouraging the federal government to build the repository, whereby if it were to be built the State of Nevada would financially benefit from it. Bullfrog County, a 144-square mile island in Nye County east of Rhyolite, was located on the Nellis Air Force Range and Nevada Test Site. Governor Richard Bryan appointed the county commissioners, since there were no residents to elect them, and the county seat was in Carson City, the state capital.



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Creating a county in this manner was apparently a first in the history of the nation. In fact, it was so irregular that a senior judicial district judge on February 11, 1988 declared Nevada's 18th county unconstitutional. Nye County officials had filed the lawsuit charging that the legislation contained numerous violations of state and federal constitutions. "You are stretching every which way when you get to the real meat of the statute," Judge David Zenoff opined. The 1989 legislature repealed the law creating Bullfrog County and Nye County reclaimed the Yucca Mountain area.

Today population in southern Nye County is mushrooming with the growth of the town of Pahrump. Over the last few years, there has been talk of creating a new county, or moving the county seat from Tonopah to Pahrump, as well as perhaps incorporating Pahrump as a city.

Pahrump will surely continue to boom with the spill-over from the explosive growth in nearby Las Vegas Valley. Time will tell if Nye County continues to be ranked as the nation's third largest county.

Photo credit: Nye County map courtesy of the Nevada Secretary of State's office.

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